

**Testimony before the Montgomery County Council
in Support of the
Gaithersburg West Master Plan**

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by

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Good evening. My name is Roger K. Lewis. I am a professor emeritus of architecture at the University of Maryland College Park, a practicing architect and planner, and a journalist; I write about architecture and planning in my Washington Post column, "Shaping the City."

I have had no involvement with creation of the Gaithersburg West Master Plan but have visited the Gaithersburg West planning area, read the plan and understand its goals, principles and design strategies. I fully concur with and support those laudable goals, principles and design strategies.

The vision for Gaithersburg West embodies state-of-the-art "smart growth" policies and planning. It calls for compact, coherent development taking advantage of proximity to the I-270 corridor and public infrastructure. It is an antidote to costly, inefficient sprawl that otherwise would threaten the county's unique inventory of preserved open space and parkland. It advocates creation of a sustainable, urbane community of commercial, residential, scientific and recreational uses served by a rational grid pattern of interconnected streets. It necessitates improved access to local arterials, regional highways and public transit - the realigned Corridor City Transitway. Bikeway and pedestrian trail networks are a vital part of the plan, along with generously deployed open space - parks, plazas, playing fields and preserved natural landscape. At the periphery of the site are transitional uses, stepped-down density, appropriate building setbacks and open space ensuring visual and functional compatibility with surrounding neighborhoods.

I believe the plan's overall density, density distribution, building heights and allocation of uses are both reasonable and necessary. Sufficient density is indispensable for making transit and infrastructure improvements financially feasible, and for achieving the county's economic and environmental goals.

Some residents worry that this plan will adversely change the character of their neighborhoods. But Arlington, Virginia, demonstrates otherwise. Residents of subdivisions flanking Arlington's Rosslyn-Ballston corridor had similar worries 35 years ago when the Arlington County Board decided to spend tens of millions of extra dollars to run Metro's Orange Line underground below Wilson and Clarendon Boulevards, with five expensive Metro stations. Displaying unusual foresight and great political courage, the board sensed that, despite the risk, this long-term investment eventually would catalyze physical and economic revitalization of this hodge-podge, low-density commercial strip corridor. Today, with its high-density, mixed-use urban nodes built around the five Metro stations, the redeveloped corridor has repaid the county's investment many times over. The impact on nearby homes also has been wholly positive: neighborhoods look and feel the same, home values have risen dramatically, and residents love living within easy walking distance of shops and stores, restaurants, entertainment and recreational amenities. Moreover, traffic congestion in the corridor is much less than originally predicted.

Two closing thoughts. First, a long-range master plan cannot address only today's problems. It must create a relatively stable yet reasonably flexible framework for both the near and distant future, as unknowable as that future may be. It must be a plan for our grandchildren and their grandchildren, who will inhabit a world most assuredly different from ours. This is the genius of L'Enfant's enduring plan of Washington, DC, crafted more than 200 years ago and still guiding development today. Second, the viability of a comprehensive, long-range master plan cannot depend on current real estate ownership or real estate programs. An effective framework plan must prove feasible, durable and flexible no matter who controls the government, the land or the purse-strings. The Gaithersburg West Master Plan is such a plan.